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THE ROLE OF 'FLOWERS' IN NAHUATL CULTURE: A SUGGESTED INTERPRETATION

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In the course of editing the text of a midnight mushroom *velada* ('vigil') sung by María Sabina, the Mazatec *curandera* or shaman, I have had occasion to concentrate my attention on the famous statue of Xochipilli, in the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City, with results that I would now submit to students of the Mesoamerican cultures.

Xochinanácatl. All students of the history of Nahuatl culture are familiar by now with the word *teonanácatl*, 'god's flesh', the name used for the hallucinogenic mushrooms by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún and Fray Toribio de Benavente called Motolinía. But we may be justified in asking ourselves why this term is not to be found in Fray Alonso de Molina's great lexicon of the Nahuatl language published in 1571. He gives us another word, *xochinanácatl*, 'flower mushroom', from *xochitl*, 'flower'.

We find *xochinanácatl* in a place name that survives to this day, Xochinanacatlán, a *municipio* of Tlaola, district of Huachinango, State of Puebla. Does the word occur anywhere else in Nahuatl texts? Was it one of perhaps several alternative expressions for the psychotropic mushrooms, one that Alonso Molina may have

had good reason to give to his readers rather than *teonanácatl*, 'god's flesh', an appalling word for a 16th Century churchman to write down, to utter, or even to think? As the mushrooms carried with them an aura of holiness for the Indians, it was certainly inevitable that there should be a variety of evasive terms for them.

A peculiar trait of Nahuatl poetry is the preoccupation of the poets with 'flowers': they write incessantly about flowers but they fail to distinguish the kinds of blossoms, though Nahuatl was rich in botanical terminology. This feature of Nahuatl poetry has baffled students: it seems inconsistent with the nature of poets, who delight in fine distinctions. It has even been called to the attention of the outside world. In *The Times* (London) of 15 May 1961 there appeared a dispatch from Mexico City written by their correspondent stressing this odd fact: 'Strangely, the ancient Mexican poet seldom differentiated between one blossom and another, although old indigenous names for many plants exist.' If *xochitl* was used by the poets as a metaphor for the inebriating mushrooms, or for hallucinogens as a class, this would explain the poets' addiction to the generic term for all flowers.

Here are examples where I think *xochitl* stands for the inebriating mushrooms:

1. O ya noconic in nanacaoctli ya noyol in choca. . .
 ma yuh tonpolihuiz a iz ca toxochiuh.
 ¡Ay, he bebido licor de hongos embriagadores: mi
 corazón llora!. . .
 ¡así has de desaparecer! ¡Aquí están tus *flores*!
 O! I have drunk the liquor of inebriating mushrooms!
 My heart is weeping!. . .
 Thus you are to disappear! Here are your *flowers*!

Romances de los Señores de la Nueva España, c. A.D. 1470, Ms. in the Library of the University of Texas, Austin. Published in *Xochimapietli*, ed. by Father Garibay, Mexico, 1959.

2. Xoxopan, yn ompa temoaya in Ipalnemohuani, in mocuicaizhuayotia, moxochiapana.

Huehuetitlan momalina, ye motech onquiza an *yhuinti xochitli*. ¡Ma xonahuiacan!

En el verano, cuando descende el Dador de la Vida, todo reverdece con sus cantos, se adorna con sus flores. En el lugar de los atabales, de tí salen *las flores que embriagan*. ¡Alegráos!

In summer, when the Giver of Life descends, everything turns green with his songs, is adorned with his flowers. In the place of the kettle drums, from You spring forth *the flowers that inebriate*. Rejoice!

Same collection of *Romances*, see above, but not published in *Xochimapietli*.

3. Ica xon ahuiacan *ihuinti xochitli* tomac mani: Ma on te ya-quilo toxochicozqui in toquippanxochiuh. Tla cecelia *xochitli*, cueponia *xochitli*. Oncan nemi tototl chachalaca tlatohua. Ohua yahualo quiman teotl ichan.

Gozáos con las flores que son embriagadoras: están en nuestras manos. Que sean introducidos nuestros flores de tiempo de lluvia. ¡Estén rozagantes las flores, abran sus corolas las flores! Anda por ahí el ave, parlotea, gorjea. Con pena da giros: ¡va en pos de la casa del dios!

Enjoy the inebriating flowers! *Bring on our necklaces of flowers! Our flowers of the rainy season!* May the flowers be showy, may the flowers unfold their corollas! There goes the bird, chattering, gurgling. With difficulty he darts around. He goes in quest of the house of god!

Same collection of *Romances*, see above. [Italics mine.]

Note: What Father Garibay translated as *corola* ('corolla'), could it be the pileus of *xochinanácatl*?

Xochipilli. Let us assume that this interpretation of *xochitl* as an alternative name for the sacred mushrooms holds good. In that case we should turn to Xochipilli, a divinity in the Aztec pantheon, the 'Prince of Flowers' as Miguel León Portilla has translated his name, and specifically to the powerful statue that represents him, a statue unearthed in Tlalmanalco on the slopes of Popocatepetl, now on display in the great hall of the Museo Nacional in Mexico City. (See Plate XXIV.) Justino Fernández has given us a detailed description and explanation of this statue in 'Una aproximación a Xochipilli' in *Estudios de la Cultura Nahuatl*, Vol. 1. I will now submit for consideration an utterly different interpretation of it.

Justino Fernández cannot help but see the 'ecstasy' (this is his word) in the expression on this man's face, but for his explanation ecstasy is superfluous, perhaps even out of place, and he would minimize this trance-like pose for the original viewers by suggesting that if the eye-sockets were filled with precious materials, as he thinks they once were, this impression would be reduced.

For me ecstasy in this statue is of the essence. The skyward tilt of the head, the half-open mouth and jutting jaw, the hands poised in the air at different levels,¹ the crossed legs and feet raised off the ground: here is the work of a master, a supreme carving of a man enjoying an unearthly experience, the formal, hieratic effigy of the God of 'Flowers', of the God of Rapture.

If one looks into the eye-sockets or even more clearly under the chin, one observes that this man is wearing a mask. In the cultures of the West the mask has no longer importance: it is relegated to children or to light hearted entertainment, as in masked balls and the fes-

¹ Here there is a puzzling factor: in the palm of the left hand and in the middle of the chest there are indications of something missing, broken. What was this lost object?

PLATE XXIV



Xochipilli, 'Prince of Flowers'

Statue on exhibit in Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City.

Photo from Archive of Inst. Nac. de Antrop. e Hist.

tivities that welcome in the New Year. But in antiquity and in virtually all the other cultures of the world the mask takes on serious purport. It shows the salient trait of character that the bearer means to portray, a personification of that trait. In the Xochipilli statue obviously the mask dramatically emphasizes the ecstatic man, and does so with the power of genius. Here is a man who is not seeing, not living as ordinary mortals see and live, who is seeing directly with the eyes of the soul. This man is not with us, is in a far off world. (See Plate XXVIII.)

I like to think that the eye-sockets were empty from the beginning, intentionally so. In this hieratic carving with mask and formal head dress, we are given the opportunity to perceive to the full the role played by rapture in pre-Columbian Mesoamerican culture, the gravity with which the hallucinogenic experience was instinct.

Let us now examine the bas-reliefs that adorn the body of the man and the base on which he rests. And here we come on surprising facts. As I am no botanist, I invoked the help of Professor Richard Evans Schultes, Director of the Botanical Museum of Harvard University, and the following identifications largely reflect his thinking and that of his students, Mr. Timothy Plowman and Mr. Tommie Lockwood and his colleague, the scientific artist Mr. Elmer W. Smith. Certainly many of the carvings, and probably all, are of hallucinogenic plants familiar to the Aztecs, and thus they clinch my initial response to the pose of the statue. So that the reader may judge the identifications, the distinguished artist Margaret Seeler has drawn the series of figures that we now show in our text.

The base and the man are separate stones but clearly they were made for each other. The carvings are stylized in varying degree and one or two of them seem to be but roughly finished. Let us begin with the base.

The same conspicuous emblem, obviously a plant motif, is repeated on the four sides of the base and many have referred to it as a 'flower'. But what flower and why? From the beginning I thought that the five convex devices with inturned margins arranged in a circle were mushrooms. They are the caps in profile. A sixth is hidden by the carving of a mythic butterfly. But the caps of mushrooms offer us a wide variety of shapes, in the wide variety of species and in the different stages of the life cycle of each species. Even among the hallucinogenic kinds—species of *Psilocybe*, *Stropharia*, and *Conocybe*—there is much diversity. The slopes of Popocatepetl are the land of Tlalocan, the paradise of the Nahuatl, and here the statue was unearthed, in the heart of the sacred mushroom country. It was precisely in this vicinity that Professor Roger Heim discovered with the help of Nahuatl-speaking Indians *Psilocybe aztecorum* Heim, a species then new to science, described and illustrated later in *Les Champignons Hallucinogènes du Mexique*,² Plate XV, with the description on pp. 154–158. I draw attention to his figures 15 and 16 of specimens found in their natural habitat and showing the pileus at the moment when it begins to break forth into maturity. Slightly stylized, the mushrooms in stone catch admirably the precise convex shape of the actual pileus or cap of the living plant. The inturned margins (*la marge. . . incurvée*, as Professor Heim says) are one of the specific characteristics distinguishing this species of *Psilocybe*. The left-hand Figure 1a reproduces what we find on the statue and 1b the illustration in *Les Champignons Hallucinogènes*:

² By Roger Heim and R. G. Wasson, published in 1958 by the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris.



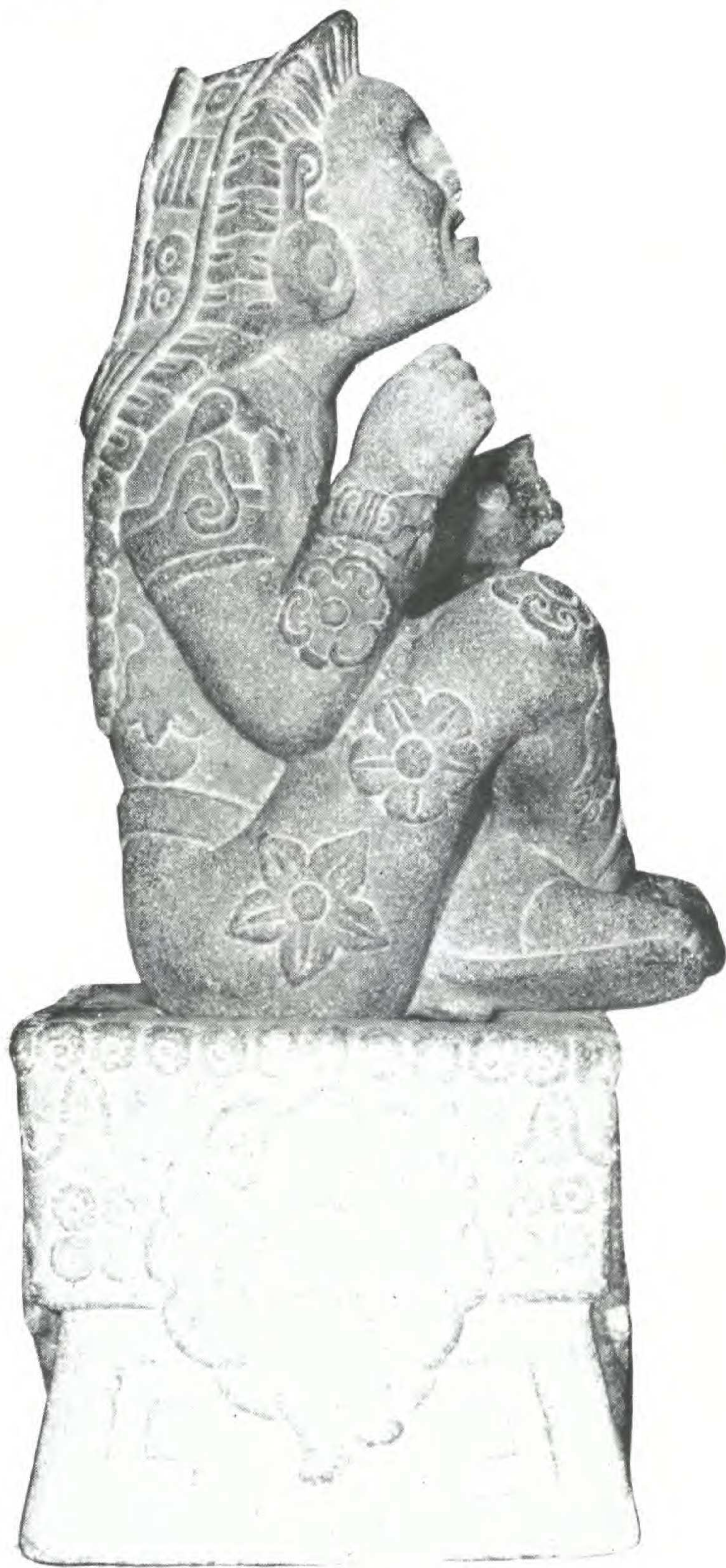
a Fig. 1 b
 Profile of *P. aztecorum* compared with Xochipilli base.

The mushroom at this stage in its life is scarcely two centimeters at its greatest width. The mushroom motif also appears repeatedly on the body of our man in rapture—on both his knees, on his right forearm, on the top of his elaborate headdress. In these body representations the mushrooms are reduced to three in number, but always with the same profile. Both on the base and more conspicuously on the body there seem to be other mushrooms behind the ones that we have discussed, only the peak of the cap of these other mushrooms being visible:



Fig. 2

On the base there is what everyone familiar with Mesoamerican art will recognize as a highly stylized



View of Xochipilli, right side.

butterfly, perched among the mushrooms and concealing the sixth one, apparently feeding on them. Why the butterfly? In this world of nature mushrooms do not draw butterflies, but in the iconography of the Nahua and Mixtecs butterflies play an important mythic role, as we see in the butterflies of the famous mural of Tepantitla, showing us Tlalocan, the paradise of the Nahua. Butterflies are associated with the land of fortunate departed spirits. George Cowan in *Yan* (1953 No. 2) has told us that in some parts of the contemporary Mazatec world butterflies are still considered to be the souls of the departed revisiting their native haunts. On the base of the statue of Xochipilli the butterfly is feasting on the flesh of the divine mushrooms, the spirit food of the gods, to whose world the mushrooms transport for a brief spell the people of this sad work-a-day world. Mrs. Seeler has reproduced this mythic butterfly, the symbol that certainly supports and ratifies our identification of the sacred mushrooms:



Fig. 3
The Mythic Butterfly

On three sides of the base there are groups of four concentric circles, one group on each side of what we have suggested are the sacred mushrooms, *Psilocybe aztecorum*. On the back of the elaborate hairdress there are five such groups, balanced in four cases with four rods. According to orthodox interpretation these are numbers, each of the rods being 5, that is, 20 to every group of 4, and each group of circles being 4. We can suggest no explanation of these ostensible numbers. There is a wavy line running around the base near its top edge and the suggestion has been made that it signifies water. Along the upper edge of the base we find a row of concentric circles, the glyph that also means 'water', a glyph, as we hope to demonstrate in a future paper, that grew out of the glyph for 'mushroom' in Teotihuacan III.

On a pectoral or breastplate that Xochipilli is wearing there may be two carved 'mushrooms', but I am in some doubt about them. The earrings that the statue wears could be mushrooms, but these concentric circles might easily be something else. So much for the sacred mushrooms.

Let us now turn our attention to *Rivea corymbosa*, the *ololiuhqui* of the Nahuatl, the hallucinogenic morning glory identified with Mesoamerican cultures. On the right thigh near the knee there is a carving of the morning glory flower as one views it looking into the cup. Mrs. Seeler reproduces the carving on the thigh and also copies the illustration of *Rivea corymbosa* from the same angle as shown in Schultes' classic paper, 'A Contribution to Our Knowledge of *Rivea corymbosa*, the Narcotic *Ololiuhqui* of the Aztecs', published by the Botanical Museum of Harvard University in 1941. (Fig. 4, p. 316.)

On the left leg below the knee and again just above the knee on the left thigh there are carvings of the

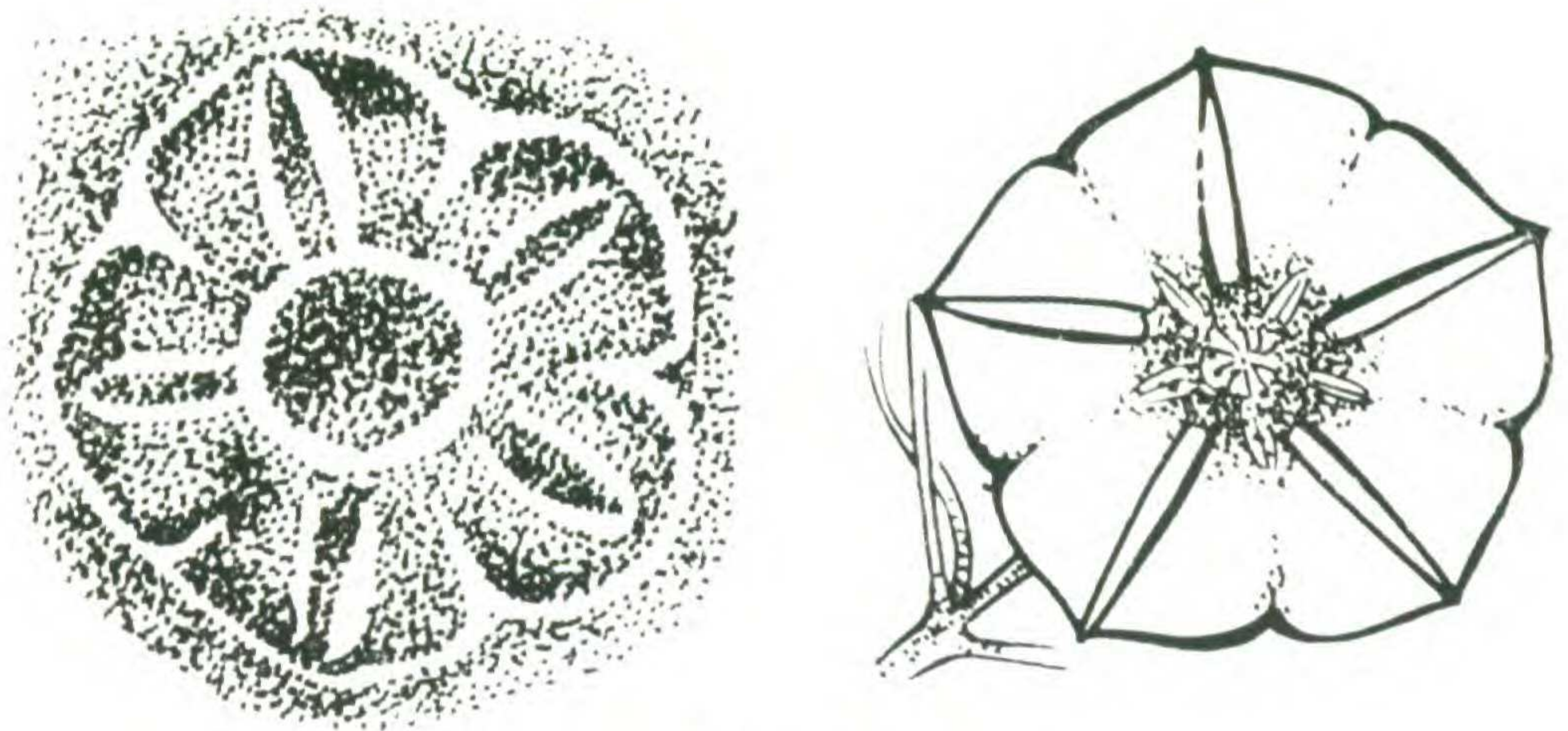


Fig. 4
Rivea corymbosa or *ololiuhqui*

emerging morning glory flower, showing the plaiting and convolutions characteristic of that stage. In Fig. 5 Mrs. Seeler reproduces the design on the left thigh:



Fig. 5
The Morning Glory flower emerging. (See Plate XXVI.)

A series of pointed objects hang from the pectoral, four visible in our front view of the statue and others from the side views near the shoulders. There are similar carvings around the right ankle. These are ordinarily taken to be the claws of an eagle or the fangs of the jaguar or puma and this interpretation may be right. But should we not pause before jumping to an interpretation that in Mesoamerica is conventional and accepted thoughtlessly, without inquiry into the whole context



View of Xochipilli, left side.

of the thinking behind the specific expression in art! These motifs might just as well represent the flower of the morning glory in its familiar closed form, either before the flower has opened or when it closes at dusk, a form that would be appropriate for a string of them hanging from a pectoral. Our poet, in the third of our quotations above, sings of the 'necklaces of flowers' and these may well be the necklaces. Here Mrs. Seeler gives us the woodcut (1) of *ololiuhqui* published in 1651 in Francisco Hernández' great herbal of Mexico,³ a detail (2) of this woodcut showing how easily the closed flowers could serve as a model for what we too casually accept as jaguar's tusks, and a photograph (3) of the ornaments on the statue that we are discussing:

De OLILIUHQVI,

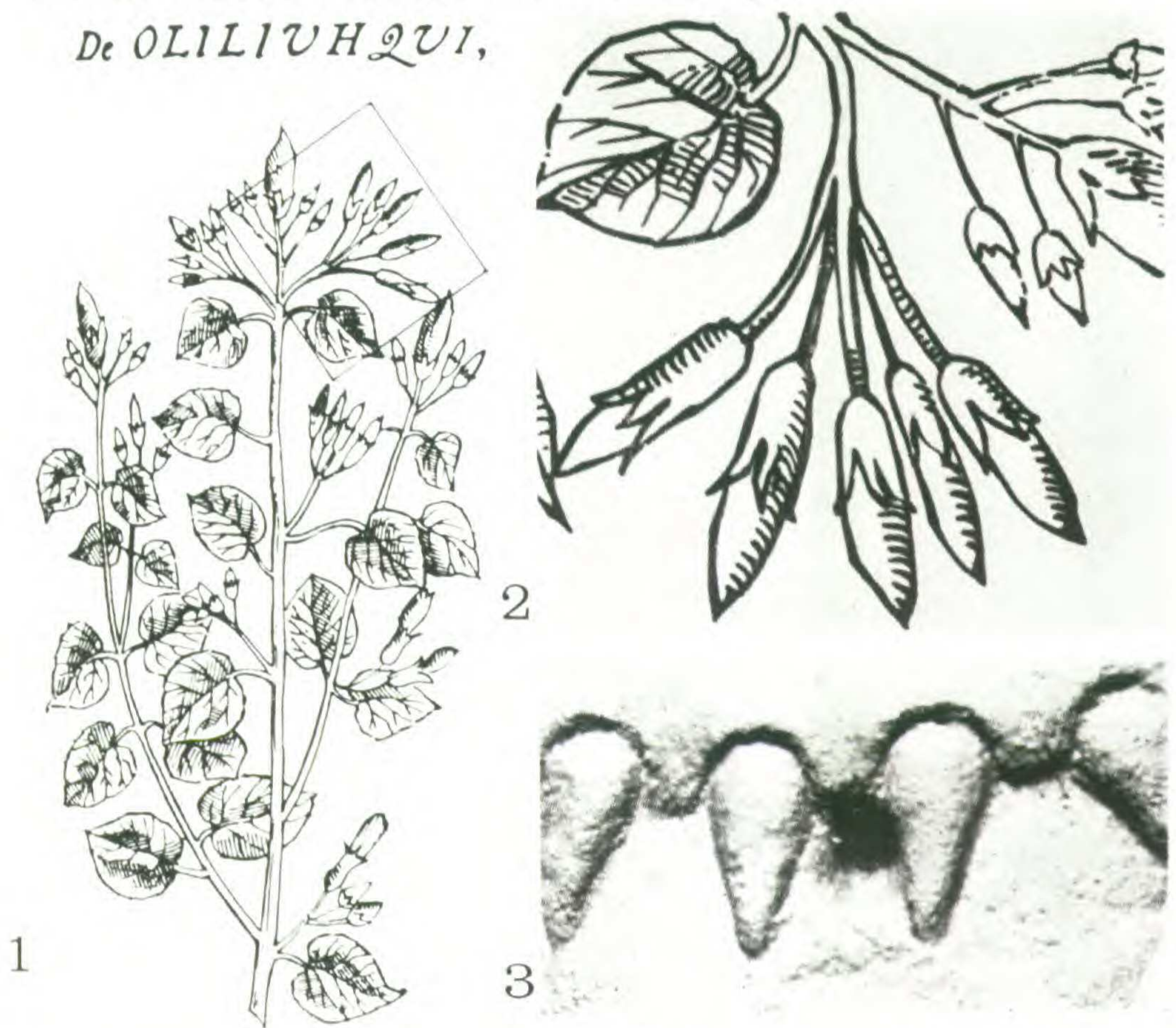


Fig. 6

³ In this herbal *ololiuhqui* is misspelled *oliliuhqui*. *Rerum medicarum Novae Hispaniae thesaurus, seu plantarum, animalium, mineralium mexicanorum historia*, Rome, 1651, p. 145.

On each shoulder there is a meandering design: could it not be the tendril of the morning glory vine?



Fig. 7
Tendril of Morning Glory?

So much for *Rivea corymbosa* or *ololiuhqui*.

Schultes is quite certain that he has identified the flower carved on the right leg below the knee: *Heimia salicifolia*, the *sinicuichi* of the Mexican highlands. Here is Mrs. Seeler's comparison of the carving and the actual plant:



a



b

Fig. 8
Heimia salicifolia, *Sinicuichi* of the Nahua

Schultes says that the plant has 'mildly intoxicating properties', and adds these details:

Sounds seem to come distorted from a great distance. This plant typifies an hallucinogen of which the hallucinogenic characteristics are auditory, not visual. The natives believe that *sinicuichi* has sacred or supernatural qualities, since they hold that it helps them recall events which took place many years earlier as if they had happened yesterday; others assert that they are able, with *sinicuichi*, to remember pre-natal events.

On contemplating the statue anew one is tempted to see in the tilt of the head and above all in the open mouth that Xochipilli is listening to the far-off voices of *sinicuichi*. Mrs. Seeler's drawing (Fig. 8b) is based on the illustration in the *Bulletin on Narcotics*, Vol. XXII, No. 1, January-March 1970, p. 38, from Part III, 'The plant kingdom and hallucinogens', by Dr. Schultes.

Schultes is confident that he and his colleagues have identified another sacred plant of the Nahua: on the

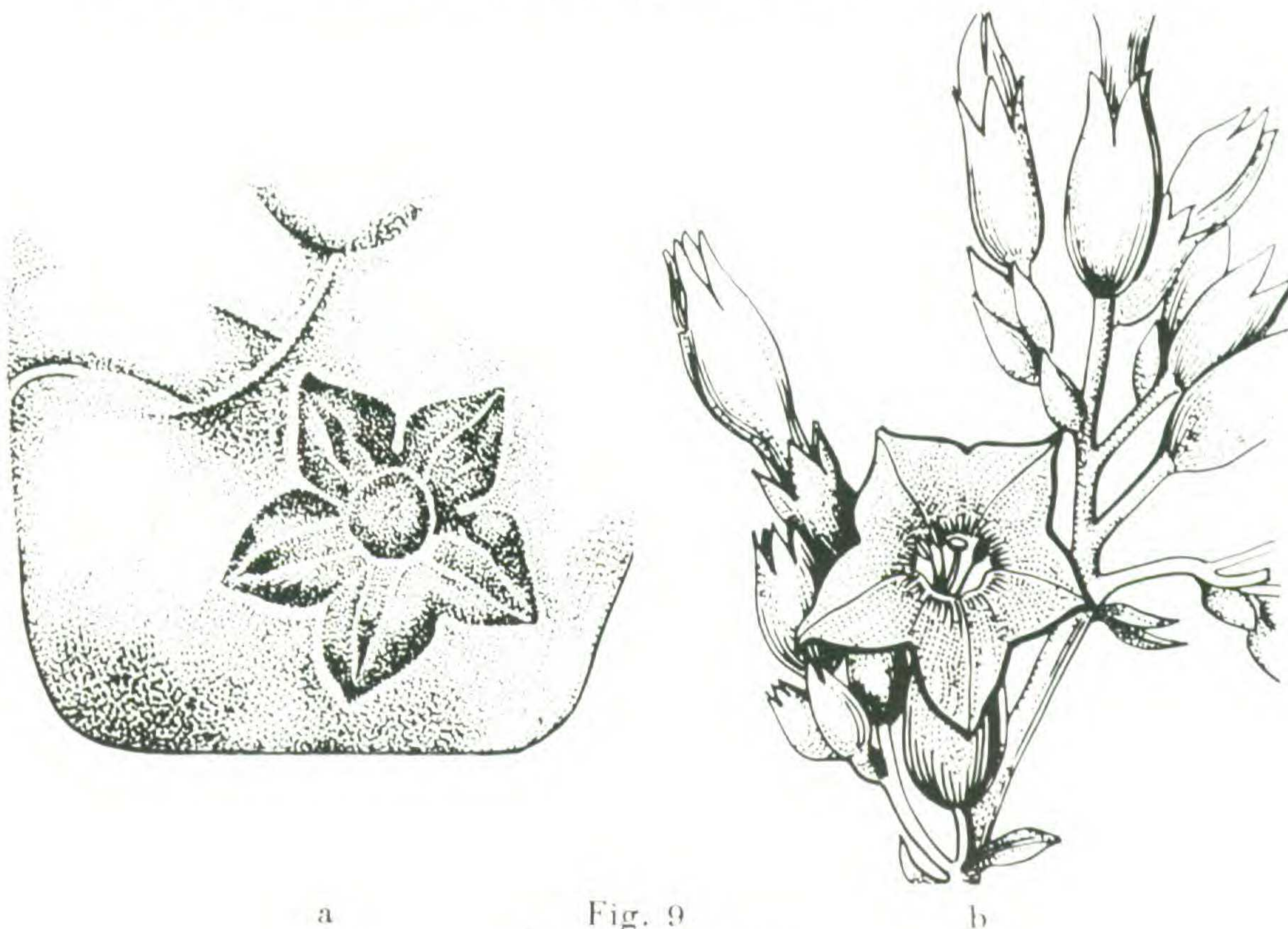


Fig. 9
Nicotiana glauca



Rear view of Xochipilli.

right thigh of Xochipilli 'where the buttock begins, is the cup of the flower of our everyday tobacco, *Nicotiana Tabacum*, repeated on the left forearm. For the Amerindians the tobacco plant was one of the most holy plants. Mrs. Seeler has reproduced the design on the right thigh (a) and also an illustration of a detail (b) of *N. Tabacum* as shown in the Britton and Brown *Illustrated Flora* edited by Henry A. Gleason, Vol. 3, p. 205.

Two carvings of flowers on the statue of Xochipilli remain. On the left side, just where buttock and thigh meet, a well delineated flower holds our attention, and the same flower appears on the right side of the torso,

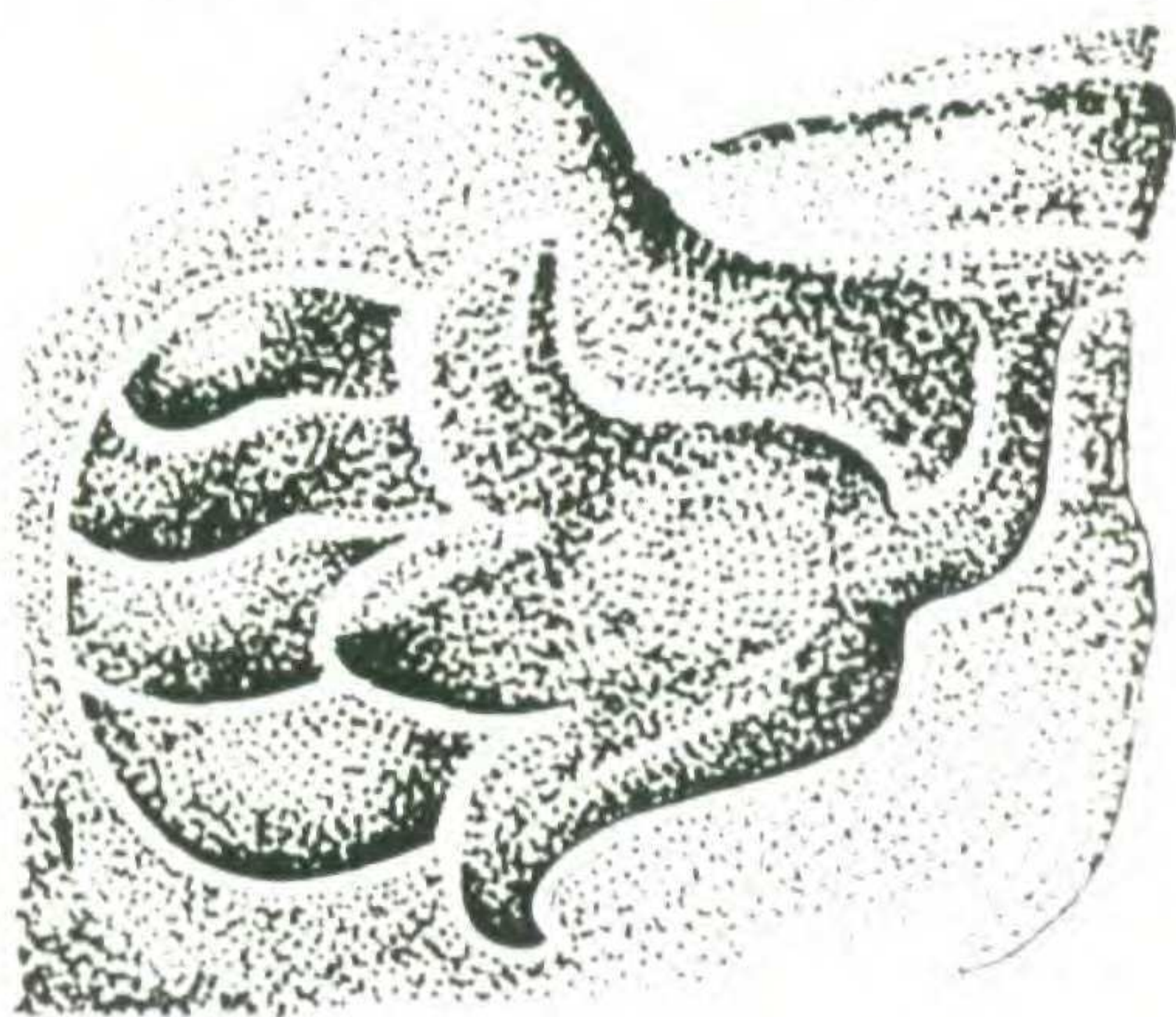


Fig. 10
Emerging bud of *Heimia salicifolia*?

above the belt. Schultes, somewhat uncertain, asks whether it could be a swollen bud of *Heimia salicifolia*, just about to open up. As we have seen, *ololiuhqui* (the morning glory *Rivea corymbosa*) is present on the statue at two stages of its growth: why not *sinicuichi* also?

Finally there is the carving on the left side of the torso, just above the belt, with two retroussé curls, clearly defined. Schultes and his colleague, Elmer Smith, subject to a better suggestion from others, think that this may represent *Calceolaria Zacatechichi*. For the Chontal Indians of Oaxaca the leaf of this plant is the *thle pela kano*, the 'leaf of god', and they use it 'for the clarification

PLATE XXVIII



Detail of Xochipilli showing mask as evidenced in eye-socket and under chin.

of the senses' in divination. The divinatory use of this composite in an infusion and by smoking was discovered a few years ago and revealed by Thomas MacDougall in the *Garden Journal* of the New York Botanical Garden, July–August 1968 issue. Until now the practice



Fig. 11
Inflorescence of *Calea zacatechichi*?

has been reported only among the Chontal of Oaxaca. Since the plant occurs widely in central Mexico, may we assume that the Nahuatl in the Valley of Mexico were also familiar with its virtues? It will be observed that in this instance, as well as in all the others, the carvings on the statue bear no relation in size to the flower or mushroom that is represented: each flower is magnified to fill suitably the space allotted to it.

In Nahuatl the hallucinogenic experience was *temixoch*, the 'flowery dream'. This fits in with our thesis: *xochitl* meant 'flower' but by extension also 'divinatory plant' or the flower of such a plant, and included among those 'flowers' we find *xochinanácatl*, the hallucinogenic mushroom. In poetry and sculpture it seems that the secondary meaning often eclipsed the primary sense.